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Henry James and the "Explosive Principle"

HENRY L. TERRIE, JR.

READERS OF HENRY JAMES'S notebooks and prefaces have not failed to observe his reiteration of the injunction to "Dramatise! Dramatise!" And at least one critic¹ has attempted to show how James's consuming desire to dramatize everything in his story, to give his readers the illusion of a continuous time-flow, led to some of the remarkable compressions and economies found in the late novels. But the Jamesian economy is important enough to demand a more extended and systematic treatment than it has yet received. The purpose of the present essay is to demonstrate as fully as possible the principal means by which James achieved his illusions of continuity and depth in the novel and to show, by reference to his critical writings, the theory behind these means. Some attention will also be given to the development of this economic art from the earliest novels to the latest.

James felt incessantly the conflicting pressures of expanding subject matter and limited space, and for him some honest resolution of the conflict was essential to successful representation:

Any real art of representation is, I make out, a controlled and guarded acceptance, in fact a perfect economic mastery, of that conflict: the general sense of the expansive, the explosive principle in one's material thoroughly noted, adroitly allowed to flush and colour and animate the disputed value, but with its other appetites and treacheries, its characteristic space-hunger and space-cunning, kept down.²

The problem then, as James states it here, is to muffle the explosion of one's material and stay within bounds without omitting any essential part of the story. The writer can, and frequently does, manage by simply removing some of the dynamite—slighting some of the action and asking the reader to take it on trust as

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¹Morris Roberts, "Henry James and the Art of Foreshortening," *RES*, XXII (1946), 207-214.

²*The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York, 1907-1917), XVIII, xv—hereafter cited in the text as *Tales*.

"done." But that is the duffer's way. It only avoids the issue; and the reader who is called upon to accept as "done" such a mass of unrepresented action is "sold" whether he knows it or not (*Tales*, XXIII, xxiii). On the other hand, complete representation of all the action would make an ordinary novel fill fifteen or twenty volumes.

That James did not always succeed in his struggle with the explosive principle is clear from the abundant evidence of the notebooks. Again and again we are told of short stories which became *nouvelles*, of *nouvelles* which became novels, and of the resulting difficulties with publishers. But James resolutely refused to compromise to the extent of merely reporting action, and so, in order to "represent" within the normal limits of a story, he resorted to various devices—"tricks" and "dodges" he called them—for compressing action without wholly sacrificing its representational quality.

From observation of James's novels it is possible to describe his "tricks" and "dodges" under five headings: (a) the presentation of antecedent action so that it is both functional in the movement of the narrative and relevant to the main action; (b) the use of a single scene to do the work of two or more scenes; (c) the use of a moment of recognition or revelation to summarize action in a significant manner; (d) the use of extended imagery to suggest a process and/or a passage of time; and (e) a page-by-page compact recording of closely observed minor actions. Obviously none of these methods is original with James; he simply developed and refined some old, established principles of narrative art.

From the time at least when Homer plunged directly into the occasion of the wrath of Achilles instead of beginning with the birth of Helen, storytellers have known the value of establishing the central action in the mind of the reader before presenting the events leading up to it. And this basic principle of epic construction has endured and applied with equal force to the novel. Naturally there are exceptions to the rule, notably in what James called novels of "that accurst autobiographic form," but James in his own practice almost invariably followed the classic procedure.³ He recognized the gains for interest, for clarity, for unity

³The one real exception among James's novels is *Washington Square* (1880), which begins *ab ovo* by describing, albeit briefly, Dr. Sloper's early career and marriage and the birth of Catherine with her mother's almost simultaneous death. *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), although it begins at a point earlier than the

in short for economy of means, in the immediate presentation of central action; the leisurely, meandering style was not for him.

But mere acceptance of the principle does not guarantee success. It is a relatively easy matter to begin with an eye-catching piece of action; the problem is when and how to arrest the action and introduce the necessary background material. Generally speaking there are three possibilities: the author may simply stop and render past events directly or in his own person; he may, seeking smoother transition from present to past, cause the thoughts of a character to turn backward; or, finally, he may introduce the material into dialogue between two or more characters. In practice, naturally, these methods are not so clearly separate, being frequently used in sequence and in combination.

Henry James used all three methods in his novels, but—though his progress is not entirely consistent in this respect—he tended with increasing experience to avoid the first one. Thus *Watch and Ward* (1871) offers James's own account of past relations between Roger Lawrence and Isabel Morton. And in *Roderick Hudson* (1875) James blithely halts in the middle of the first chapter to outline, in his own person, the family background of the book's central intelligence, Rowland Mallet. In *The American* (1877), on the other hand, we learn of Christopher Newman's past and of his reasons for coming to Europe through his perfectly natural conversation with Mr. Tristram. Again, in *The Europeans* (1878) the history of Eugenia and Felix is so closely integrated with the action and talk of the present as to be inseparable. (In this aspect of technique, at least, *The Europeans* is comparable to the late novels.) *Confidence* (1880) reverts to the method of *Roderick Hudson*. *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) also makes use at considerable length of the direct flash back. After two chapters which show Isabel at Gardencourt James plunges into a personal history of Mrs. Touchett and then moves backward in time to present directly the meeting in America between the two women and their agreement to go to Europe together. The next chapter begins again in the present with Ralph Touchett knocking at his

central action, does open near enough to the middle so that antecedent narrative is later required. *What Maisie Knew* (1897) opens with a short (five pages) prologue announcing the divorce of Maisie's parents and giving the stated conditions of her subsequent existence; the rest of the novel is a continuous record of the action involving Maisie's moral fate.

mother's door, regresses for a personal history of Ralph, then comes forward once more to present the ensuing scene between the two. This marks the last important use in James's novels of the first method. Formal flash backs do occur in later novels—such as an account of Mrs. Tarrant in *The Bostonians* (1886), of George Flack in *The Reverberator* (1888), of Nick and Peter in *The Tragic Muse* (1890); but they cease to be prominent and almost disappear after 1896.

Not only did James increasingly convey necessary knowledge of the past through the thought and speech of his characters, but he also offered smaller amounts of information at a time so that the reader's picture, instead of deriving from a single comprehensive description, emerged gradually from a dozen small touches. In *The Bostonians*, for example, there is no extended account of Olive Chancellor's past. In the opening scene Mrs. Luna tells Basil Ransom that Olive is an ardent social reformer. A few pages later we learn, through Olive's thoughts, that she had invited Basil to call out of her strong sense of family duty. In the next eighty-five pages we see a good deal of Olive's stiff, fierce-shy nature in action; and then Olive, reflecting on her own past, illuminates and explains herself in a beautifully compressed passage. Considering Matthias Pardon, who occasionally takes Verena to the theater, as a possible threat to her domination of Verena, Olive remembers that she had herself formerly gone to the theater:

Olive could enter, to a certain extent, into that; she herself had had a phase (some time after her father's death—her mother's had preceded his—when she bought the little house in Charles Street and began to live alone), during which she accompanied gentlemen to respectable places of amusement. She was accordingly not shocked at the idea of such adventures on Verena's part; than which, indeed, judging from her own experience, nothing could well have been less adventurous. Her recollections of these expeditions were as of something solemn and edifying—of the earnest interest in her welfare exhibited by her companion (there were few occasions on which the young Bostonian appeared to more advantage), of the comfort of other friends sitting near, who were sure to know whom she was with, of serious discussion between the acts in regards to the behaviour of the characters in the piece, and of the speech at the end with which, as the young man quitted her at her door, she rewarded his civility—"I must thank you for a very pleasant evening." She always felt that she made that too prim; her lips stiffened themselves as she spoke. But the whole affair had always a primness; this was discernible even to Olive's very limited

sense of humour. It was not so religious as going to evening service at King's Chapel; but it was the next thing to it.⁴

Here, in the backward glance of Olive's mind, is a whole series of scenes, reduced to a few lines which embody all the pathos of Olive's isolated frustration. It is this kind of flash back which is characteristic of James's artistic maturity. He no longer bothered with the formal introduction of characters to the reader—as in the case, say, of Rowland Mallet—but simply placed them in action before the eye and caused the acquaintance to grow, as it would in reality, by means of accumulated detail. If this statement has limited application to *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and *The Tragic Muse*, it is wholly true of the subsequent novels, those which followed the so-called dramatic years, 1890-1895.⁵

An examination of *The Ambassadors* (1903) will show the degree to which James developed his treatment of background material. In the beginning we meet Lambert Strether as though he had, unannounced, walked into the room; we learn only what would normally be evident, that he is newly arrived in Europe, is waiting for a friend, and is ready meanwhile to receive impressions. Through the first three chapters we learn little more of his background though we observe a great deal about his character; and when the flash back does come—in the form of conversation at the theater with Miss Gostrey—it is so natural a part of the action already established that the reader is not consciously aware of receiving information. From this *ficelle* we discover why Strether is in Europe; in the next chapter, as Strether walks alone through the half-remembered streets of Paris, we learn from his own awakened memories his personal history. These two chapters tell us all we need to know of antecedent action, and yet there is nowhere even a momentary faltering of the forward movement that began on the first page. Present and past are fused so smoothly that each works for the other with no sign of a division.

Closely allied to the flash back in method but separate from it in purpose is the device of the "double scene." This is an attempt to achieve richness and depth in a represented scene by superim-

⁴*The Novels and Stories of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock (London, 1921-1923), VIII, 140-141—hereafter cited in the text as *Stories*.

⁵A curious lapse from this late method occurs in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902): the first two books are devoted to the story of Kate Croy and Merton Densher; with Book III James breaks the flow of his narrative and introduces Milly Theale and Susan Stringham at considerable length before allowing their story to move forward. I feel a decided drop in interest during the space of this introduction.

posing on it one not directly rendered. The economy thus effected is obvious: the reader's mind is impressed with the idea of two, or sometimes more scenes while the writer uses the space of only one.

The Bostonians once more provides an example. Toward the end of the novel Ransom goes to the Music Hall to hear Verena speak. Seated, waiting for her appearance, he becomes increasingly aware that if he is to wrest her from Olive he must do it now, must prevent this public spectacle. He rushes backstage only to find the crucial door guarded by a policeman. There follows a tense, half-comic argument between Ransom and the policeman as to whether Verena will actually go on stage. As time passes and sounds from the hall indicate some delay, the two men speculate on what is happening behind that closed door. These speculations continue for some time, aided by the entrances and exits of Matthias Pardon and Mr. Filer, until finally Verena herself opens the door to talk to Ransom. Their impassioned dialogue is overshadowed by the scene we have known to be taking place behind the closed door and which Verena now describes to her lover. In the course of the novel there have been several fully dramatized scenes between Verena and Olive, some including the former's parents, so that we can picture the unrepresented scene easily enough. James has not only achieved the illusion of a scene he did not represent but also made several positive gains in the process. In the scene between Ransom and the policeman he has been able to introduce a kind of comic relief from the supercharged seriousness of the main characters, at the same time creating an air of suspense concerning Verena's unseen struggle with Olive and her parents; and the subsequent scene, with Ransom and Verena surrounded by relatives and friends as they make their decision for flight, is enriched by our knowledge of what went on invisibly a few minutes earlier.

A more elaborate example of this technique may be seen in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), where an "omitted" scene occurring about 200 pages from the end overshadows and enriches all the rest of the action. It will be remembered that, as the price of his deception of Milly Theale, Merton Densher exacts from Kate Croy a promise to come alone to his rooms in Venice. This is to be her "sacrifice," her token of good faith in their bargain. At the end of Book VIII Kate gives her promise. Book IX begins with Densher's reflections on Kate's visit, which has already taken place,

and the reader is asked to assume the fact of sexual intimacy between the two lovers.

Some readers have objected to this kind of omission in James as an unnatural avoidance of the facts of life, and no doubt there is some justice in the complaint, but consider in this case what a different procedure would have done to the story. A direct presentation of physical love between Kate and Densher would surely have been a major breach of artistic decorum. It would have violated the whole tone of the novel, the tone indeed of Henry James; for James consistently found his interest not in action itself but in the appreciation of action. It was thus not the fact of sexual intercourse between Kate and Densher which mattered but the aftereffect of that intercourse on the characters and on the events in which they were involved. And James skillfully exploited the effects of the scene without incurring the obvious disadvantages of representing it directly.⁶

James's intention becomes apparent on the first page of Book IX as Densher measures the profundity of his reaction:

What had come to pass within his walls lingered there as an obsession importunate to all his senses, it lived again, as a cluster of pleasant memories, at every hour and in every object; it made everything but itself irrelevant and tasteless. It remained, in a word, a conscious watchful presence active on its own side, for ever to be reckoned with, in face of which the effort at detachment was scarcely less futile than frivolous (*Tales*, XX, 235).

The succeeding pages are full of references to "the fruit of their intimate relation" so that the reader, like Densher, has it con-

⁶In the privacy of his notes for *The Wings of the Dove* James does not evade the facts. Of Milly he can say, "It has bothered me in thinking of the little picture—this idea of the physical possession, the brief physical, passionate rapture which at first appeared essential to it; bothered me on account of the ugliness, the incongruity, the nastiness, *en somme*, of the man's 'having' a sick girl: also on account of something rather pitifully obvious and vulgar in the presentation of such a remedy for her despair—and such a remedy only. 'Oh, she's dying without having had it? Give it to her and let her die'—that strikes me as sufficiently second-rate" (*The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, New York, 1947, p. 170). And in speaking of Kate and Densher he shows that his reticence in the novel springs at least in part from the problem of writing for English eyes: "If I were writing for a French public the whole thing would be simple—the elder, the 'other,' woman would simply be the mistress of the young man, and it would be a question of his taking on the dying girl for a time—having a temporary liaison with her. But one can do so little with English adultery—it is so much less inevitable, and so much more ugly in all its hiding and lying side. It is so undermined by our immemorial tradition of original freedom of choice, and by our practically universal acceptance of divorce" (*Notebooks*, p. 170).

stantly before him. This state of mind continues until the day when Mrs. Stringham comes and breaks the spell with her news of Milly's collapse. Then "Kate's presence affected him suddenly as having swooned or trembled away" (*Tales*, XX, 282). Moved by sympathy for Milly and shame at his own betrayal of her, Densher, for the rest of his stay in Venice, forgets his moment of passion with Kate, a fact emphasized by the sudden disappearance of reminiscent words and phrases from the text. But at first sight of Kate on his return to England he "felt what their interruption had been" (*Tales*, XX, 313), and again the "omitted" scene is made to hang over the thoughts and actions of the characters until the final chapter, which is a directly presented scene with Kate and Densher alone in his rooms.

That James intended this concluding scene to be compared with the earlier, omitted one is made clear in the first sentence when he speaks of Kate as "coming not as she had come in Venice, under his extreme solicitation, but as a need recognized in the first instance by herself" . . . (*Tales*, XX, 388). As the two lovers face each other over their past and their present, Densher feels "the need to bury in the dark blindness of each other's arms the knowledge of each other that they could n't undo" (*Tales*, XX, 392). This is of course a reference to their whole complicated relationship, but the physical intimacy in Venice is the most memorable fact between them. And then James gives us the first and only direct account of the early scene:

The great and obvious thing as soon as she stood there . . . was that she was now in high possession of [her freedom]. This would have marked immediately the difference—had there been nothing else to do it—between their actual terms and their other terms, the character of their last encounter in Venice . . . She was as grave now as before; she looked around her, to hide it, as before; she pretended, as before, in an air in which her words at the moment itself fell flat, to an interest in the place and a curiosity about his "things"; there was a recall in the way in which, after she had failed a little to push up her veil symmetrically and he had said she had better take it off altogether, she had acceded to his suggestion before the glass (*Tales*, XX, 397).

Here is a masterful working out of the "double scene." The reader can now visualize for himself, through Kate's nervousness and Densher's attempt to put her at ease, all that is either necessary or desirable of the omitted action at the same time that he

receives a direct impression of this final scene. And of course each scene in its implications illuminates the other. If this kind of economy is what made James call the second half of *The Wings of the Dove* “the false and deformed half” (*Tales*, XIX, xviii), then we must take his remark with reservations.

A third method of compression, which also produces more than mere economy, is the use of a “moment of recognition,” a moment which for a character in some memorable, heightened way—usually involving a visual catalyst—summarizes and explains a large area of experience. In *A Small Boy and Others* James recorded such a moment in his own life when he recalled seeing a peasant woman standing in a field before a ruined castle.⁷ And just as the full recognition of the implications of that moment came only on subsequent reflection, so it is for Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* when she observes her husband talking with Madam Merle. The lady is standing while the gentleman is seated, and there is an air of intimacy between the two which strikes Isabel as somehow new and odd:

Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it. Madam Merle was there in her bonnet, and Gilbert Osmond was talking to her; for a minute they were unaware she had come in. Isabel had often seen that before, certainly; but what she had not seen, or at least had not noticed, was that their colloquy had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them. Madam Merle was standing on the rug, a little away from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her. Her head was erect, as usual, but her eyes were bent on his. What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them. There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it (*Tales* IV, 164-165).

⁷ (New York, 1913); pp. 281-285.

The force of this impression on Isabel is revealed in a later passage at the end of her all night vigil by the fire, during which she ponders deeply the state of her life and the implications of her marriage. Going to bed finally at four o'clock, "she stopped again in the middle of the room and stood there gazing at a remembered vision—that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated" (*Tales*, IV, 205). On another occasion, when the Countess Gemini, making her revelation of Pansy's parentage, asks, "'Had it never occurred to you that he [Osmond] was for six or seven years her lover?'" Isabel replies, "'I don't know. Things *have* occurred to me, and perhaps that was what they all meant'" (*Tales*, IV, 365). The pictorial moment had been vivid, and now what it stood for is concrete.

The practice of the final period, with its superior richness and depth, may be observed in *The Wings of the Dove*, where a pair of these "moments of revelation" serve to sum up both Milly's capacity for life and the recognition of her courage by others. The first appears shortly after the introduction of Milly and Mrs. Stringham, and the occasion is Milly's solitary walk near the Brünig Pass in Switzerland when she is absent so long that Mrs. Stringham undertakes to follow her. At a turn in the path Mrs. Stringham suddenly sees Milly, seated on the edge of a cliff and staring into space. For a moment full of terror she fears that Milly is contemplating a suicidal leap but, on reflection, realizes that such is not the case and silently retreats with the

conviction that the future was n't to exist for her princess in the form of any sharp or simple release from the human predicament. It would n't be for her a question of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life, to the general muster of which indeed her face might have been directly presented as she sat there on her rock (*Tales*, XIX, 125).

This broad recognition by Mrs. Stringham comes to us in a brief moment of the book's action, whereas if the "explosive principle" had operated unrestrained it might have developed only through many pages of narrative.

The truth of Mrs. Stringham's insight is, as we know, revealed by the remainder of Milly's life, but the essence of that life is summed up in a single moment which demonstrates Milly's Jamesian capacity for being "finely aware." It is the intense

moment when Milly, in company with Lord Mark, stands before the Bronzino and is assured that she resembles the woman of the portrait. Standing there, gazing at her likeness, she experiences a revelation:

Things melted together—the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon . . . she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. “I shall never be better than this” (*Tales*, XIX, 220-221).

And when her companion misunderstands her comment, Milly explains, “‘I mean that everything this afternoon has been too beautiful, and that perhaps everything together will never be so right again.’”⁸

Milly is here presented as symbolically confronting her destiny, “taking full in the face the whole assault of life.” Such a moment of recognition, for both Milly and the reader, advances the story with the force and penetration of several scenes—and at the same time leaves the reader with a concentrated visual image of the action.

A fourth means for economy, for “imparting to patches the value of presences, for dressing objects in an *air* as of the dimensions they can’t possibly have” (*Tales*, XIX, xix), is the use of extended images to give the illusion of represented action. This is an effect which appears most frequently in the poetic climate of the late novels and is best illustrated from those works. The most famous example is the often quoted “pagoda passage” in *The Golden Bowl*. Maggie is meditating on the course of her marriage, which seems obscurely unsettled:

⁸For an identification of this portrait see Miriam Allott, “The Bronzino Portrait in Henry James’s ‘The Wings of the Dove,’” *MLN*, LXVIII (1953), 23-25.

This situation had been occupying for months and months the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful beautiful but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned at the overhanging eaves with silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow: looking up all the while at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out as yet where she might have entered had she wished. She had n't wished till now—such was the odd case; and what was doubtless equally odd besides was that though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve from within, and especially far aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. At present however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder: she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedently near. The thing might have been, by the distance at which it kept her, a Mahometan mosque, with which no base heretic could take a liberty; there so hung about it the vision of one's putting off one's shoes to enter and even verily of one's paying with one's life if found there as an interloper. She had n't certainly arrived at the conception of paying with her life for anything she might do; but it was nevertheless quite as if she had sounded with a tap or two one of the rare porcelain plates. She had knocked in short—though she could scarce have said whether for admission or for what; she had applied her hand to a cool smooth spot and had waited to see what would happen. Something *had* happened; it was as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within; a sound sufficiently suggesting that her approach had been noted (*Tales* XXIV, 3-4).

In this brief passage the story covers several months of growing awareness in Maggie: her life is a garden containing the structure of her marriage, which is so altered by the fact of the Prince's alienation as to be unrecognizable; instead of the familiar, comfortable house of a happy marriage it is a "strange tower," an "outlandish pagoda," a "Mahometan mosque"—she cannot yet be sure just what it is, the only certainty being that the building represents something foreign to her experience. Thus, we actually see Maggie living her life during this period in a kind of symbolic

action, though admittedly the reader's powers of concentration are more taxed by the symbol than they would be by conventional narrative.

A similar, if less formidable case is the first meeting, at an evening party, of Kate Croy and Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*:

They had found themselves regarding each other straight, and for a longer time on end than was usual even at parties in galleries; but that in itself after all would have been a small affair for two such handsome persons. It was n't, in a word, simply that their eyes had met; other conscious organs, faculties, feelers had met as well, and when Kate afterwards imaged to herself the sharp deep fact she saw it, in the oddest way, as a particular performance. She had observed a ladder against a garden-wall and had trusted herself so to climb it as to be able to see over into the probable garden on the other side. On reaching the top she had found herself face to face with a gentleman engaged in a like calculation at the same moment, and the two enquirers had remained confronted on their ladders. The great point was that for the rest of that evening they had been perched—they had not climbed down; and indeed during the time that followed Kate at least had had the perched feeling—it was as if she were there aloft without a retreat. A simpler expression of all this is doubtless but that they had taken each other in with interest . . . (*Tales*, XIX, 53-54).

The final sentence in this quotation set off against the preceding description provides a fair sample of the difference between truly "representative" writing and writing which must be "taken on trust." The account of a conscious affinity between the two young people in terms of the witty and altogether appropriate image of the garden wall gives us no more factual information than the bare statement, "they had taken each other in with interest"; yet what a difference to the reader's apprehension! In the latter case we learn what has happened, but we learn it in the abstract and are left groping in the dark for some picture; in the former we receive that direct impression of life which is the essence of James's art. Apparently forced by the limitations of space to forego full dramatization of this scene, James nevertheless made a point of giving it the concreteness of felt experience.

Finally, in addition to these "tricks" and "dodges," there remains the fact of James's extremely close observation of his characters. He visualizes them so clearly and continuously that their

minutest actions and shades of expression are recorded for us. Morris Roberts⁹ points to an excellent example in *What Maisie Knew* of a whole scene reproduced in one sentence. It is an account of Maisie arriving home in a cab with money for the fare provided by her father's mistress:

The money was far too much even for a fee in a fairy tale, and in the absence of Mrs. Beale, who, though the hour was now late, had not yet returned to the Regent's Park, Susan Ash, in the hall, as loud as Maisie was low and as bold as she was bland, produced, on the exhibition offered under the dim vigil of the lamp that made the place a contrast to the child's recent scene of light, the half-crown that an unsophisticated cabman could pronounce to be the least he would take (*Tales*, XI, 198).

Mr. Roberts says, quite rightly, that unusually close reading is required for appreciation of such a "scene." He neglects, however, to make clear the vastly increased difficulty for the reader when several such sentences are consecutive. Observe the next sentence in this same passage from *Maisie*:

It was apparently long before Mrs. Beale would arrive, and in the interval Maisie had been induced by the prompt Susan not only to go to bed like a darling dear, but, in still richer expression of that character, to devote to the repayment of obligations general as well as particular one of the sovereigns in the ordered array that, on the dressing-table upstairs, was naturally not less dazzling to a lone orphan of a housemaid than to the subject of the manoeuvres of a quartette.

Succeeding sentences describe, with the same closeness, Maisie's going to sleep with the money under her pillow, the scene with Mrs. Beale next morning in which it is decided to return the money, and still another scene in which Susan comments at length on the whole affair.

Admittedly this passage from *Maisie* is a rather extreme case: James does not often so pile scene on scene. But he does "see" his characters every step of the way and attempt to make his readers also see. These little bits of compressed action and dialogue are to be found in both early and late works, the chief difference being that in the later novels they tend to cluster more thickly. For example, consider a sentence from *The Europeans*: "They mounted, accordingly, into a great barouche—a vehicle as to which the Baroness found nothing to criticise but the price that was

⁹*Op. cit.*, pp. 207-208.

asked for it and the fact that the coachman wore a straw hat" (*Stories*, III, 37). Implied in this tiny picture are the comments of the Baroness and the answers to be assumed from her brother. Or take the passage quoted above from *The Bostonians* on Olive Chancellor's sometime practice of going to the theater with young men, and note how the catalogue of a typical evening's conversational topics plus one small patch of speech evokes the illusion of fully dramatized action:

Her recollections of these expeditions were as of something solemn and edifying—of the earnest interest in her welfare exhibited by her companion . . . of the comfort of other friends sitting near, who were sure to know whom she was with, of serious discussion between the acts in regard to the behaviour of the characters in the piece, and of the speech at the end with which, as the young man quitted her at the door, she rewarded his civility—"I must thank you for a very pleasant evening" (*Stories*, VIII, 140).

In such a compact miniature small touches contribute largely to the evocative process, and here James's diction is especially significant since the words carry the peculiarly Bostonian flavor of Olive's mind. Naming the engagements "expeditions" forbids at the outset any lightness or informality; "solemn" and "edifying" confirm the implication. Then "earnest interest" and "serious discussion" lead inevitably to "his civility." The resulting picture of the whole is remarkably complete.

I have said that scenic notations are more closely packed in the late novels. They are consequently more detailed, more concerned with the subtle registry of facial expressions and other visible evidence of awareness. Here is a sample from *The Ambassadors*: "Madame de Vionnet, having meanwhile come in, was at present close to them, and Miss Barrace hereupon, instead of risking a rejoinder, became again with a look that measured her from top to toe all mere long-handled appreciative tortoise-shell" (*Tales*, XXI, 270). The appraising look of one woman at another and the added touch of the lorgnette make a vivid appeal to the reader's eye, which is evidence of James's care with details, for the ensuing scene is between Strether and Madame de Vionnet—Miss Barrace is a silent but visible piece of stage furniture.

The Golden Bowl offers an instance of James's concern for visible relationships extending even, so to speak, beyond the

stage. When Charlotte Stant first enters Mrs. Assingham's drawing room, the Prince is there; yet Charlotte betrays no surprise and looks undistractedly at her hostess:

Charlotte Stant, the next minute, was with them, ushered in as she had alighted from her cab and prepared for not finding Mrs. Assingham alone—this would have been to be noticed—by the butler's answer, on the stairs, to a question put to him. She could have looked at that lady with such straightness and brightness only from knowing that the Prince was also there—the discrimination of but a moment, yet which let him take her in still better than if she had instantly faced him (*Tales*, XXIII, 44-45).

The depth of James's vision here is truly impressive. Not only does he account for the people in the room but he even gives us a little scene outside which explains their actions and facial expressions. All this in two sentences.

These, then, are the basic principles of Jamesian economy: the functional handling of antecedent action, the double scene, the moment of recognition, the extended image, the closely observed action.

Although James does not explicitly discuss these devices in his critical writings, he does have, as we have seen, a considerable amount to say on the general subject of economy; and perhaps it is not straining the truth to apply James's own term, "foreshortening," to the economic means I have described. In the passage quoted above on the compromise necessary to control the explosive principle in one's material, James goes on to define his term at some length:

The fair flower of this artful compromise is to my sense the secret of "foreshortening"—the particular economic device for which one must have a name and which has in its single blessedness and its determined pitch, I think, a higher price than twenty other clustered loosenesses; and just because full-fed statement, just because the picture of as many of the conditions as possible made and kept proportionate, just because the surface iridescent, even in the short piece, by what is beneath it and what throbs and gleams through, are things all conducive to the only compactness that has a charm, to the only spareness that has a force, to the only simplicity that has a grace—those, in each order, that produce the *rich* effect (*Tales*, XVIII, xv).

In "The Lesson of Balzac" James specifies two major difficulties in the novel which may be conquered by the art of foreshortening.

One of these is representation of “the lapse of time, the duration of the subject: representing it, that is, more subtly than by a blank space, or a row of stars, on the historic page”;¹⁰ we may observe this illusion of duration in the pagoda passage from *The Golden Bowl* and in the sentences quoted above from *What Maisie Knew*.¹¹ Whereas duration is a dramatic problem, the other effect of foreshortening leads us to the art of the painter, in which a two-dimensional surface is made to appear three-dimensional. It is this technique which in the novel gives the reader that “rich effect” produced by “what throbs and gleams through” from behind the surface. The properly foreshortened story, says James, “has . . . as little as possible in common with the method now usual among us, the juxtaposition of items emulating the column of numbers of a schoolboy’s sum in addition.”¹²

The art of foreshortening is thus the novelist’s best weapon to counter the explosive principle. It enables him to treat his story fully and dramatically and at the same time to do so within a reasonable number of pages. And although James referred to this art as a “compromise,” he made here, as in so many cases, a virtue of his necessity and responded to difficulty with triumphant solution. In describing the economies by which James managed to satisfy the “space-hunger and space-cunning” of his material, I have perhaps made them sound rather mechanical. In practice, of course, they were anything but that, and they contribute powerfully to one of the chief glories of the James novel, the fact that it is “a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism.”¹³

¹⁰*The Question of Our Speech. The Lesson of Balzac. Two Lectures by Henry James* (Boston and New York, 1905), pp. 109-110.

¹¹For an analysis of the foreshortened time-effect in *The Golden Bowl* see Roberts, pp. 209-212.

¹²*The Lesson of Balzac*, p. 109.

¹³“The Art of Fiction,” *Partial Portraits* (London, 1888), p. 392.